

25 THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT ANTAGONISTS

by Chuck Wendig

1. REAL PEOPLE WITH PEOPLE PROBLEMS

Antagonists are just people. Er, unless they're sentient washing machines, serial killer dinosaurs, or hyper-intelligent window treatments. *But even then*, we need to treat them like people. People with wants, needs, fears, motivations. People with families and friends and their own enemies. They're full-blooded, full-bodied characters. They're not single-minded villains twirling greasy mustaches.

2. MEANING, THEY'RE NOT JUST FUEL FOR THE PLOT ENGINE

Character is the driver. Plot is the getaway car. Character drives plot; plot does not drive character. The antagonist isn't just here as a rock in the stream diverting the plot-churned waters — he does not exist in service to a sequence of events but rather, he exists to change them, sway them, turn them to a sequence *he* wants — a sequence that stands in opposition to the protagonist. For opposition is key.

3. LIKE I JUST SAID, OPPOSITION IS KEY

Jeez, weren't you paying attention? EYES ON ME, SOLDIER. Anyway. The antagonist opposes the protagonist. Theirs are clashing motivations. They possess needs and wants that exist in defiance of one another. The protagonist wants to free the slaves; the antagonist wants to keep them and the power they provide. The protagonist wants to rescue the hostages; the antagonist wants to keep the hostages, or worse, kill 'em. The protagonist wants a chalupa; the antagonist has stolen ALL THE CHALUPAS. The antagonist can oppose the main character *directly*, seeking to undo her efforts; or the antagonist can oppose her indirectly, coming at the story at an oblique angle (but still clashing with our protagonist character). But the point is the same no matter how you slice it: the antagonist stands in the way of the protagonist's goals.

4. I LIKE KITTENS, YOU PUNCH KITTENS, NOW WE FIGHT!

The antagonist is the **foil** of the protagonist in the very fabric of his character, too — theirs are *contrasting personas*. At the simplest level, this is *heroism versus villainy*, but can (and should) go deeper than that. The protagonist is a rational woman; the antagonist is an insane serial killer. The protagonist likes Batman, PBS, and Coke. The antagonist likes Spider-Man, Cartoon Network, and Pepsi. Character traits existing in disharmony. Thesis, antithesis.

5. LIKE A GOD, EXCEPT A TOTAL JERK

The antagonist is the avatar of conflict. He causes it. His character embodies it. The antagonist is there to push and pull the sequence of events into an arrangement that pleases him. He makes trouble for the protagonist. He is the one upping the stakes. He is the one *changing the game* and *making it harder*.

6. ANTAGONISTS THINK THEY'RE THE PROTAGONISTS

The antagonist is the hero in his own story. In fact, your story's protagonist is the antagonist's antagonist. BOOM! DID I BLOW YOUR MIND? People who do bad things often justify their own actions as being somehow positive — Hitler wasn't just a troll on an international scale. He thought he was the savior of mankind and that his deeply faulty agenda was justified. This isn't to say that the antagonist's desires must be noble ("I had to kill all those people to save the orphanage!"), only that he will have convinced himself of his own nobility. The antagonist thinks he's right. And doing the right thing. Even when it's awful.

7. EVIL FOR THE SAKE OF EVIL IS YAWNTASTIC, SNORETACULAR

Antagonists who do evil just to do evil are basically big cartoons. They're Snidely Whiplash. They're Cobra Commander. They're Pageant Moms, Nancy Grace, Rush Limbaugh. In other words: boring, unbelievable, and totally untenable. Give them motivations beyond "being the biggest jerk I can be." Yes, you can in certain modes and stories get away with this (see: Batman's Joker, or nearly any killer in slasher films), but it's hard, and it puts an even greater weight on the shoulders of the protagonist.

8. THE MOTIVATIONS OF AWFUL PEOPLE

Antagonists must possess believable motivations. And a motivation is the thing we tell ourselves — right? A racist doesn't act just because he thinks people of other races should experience pain. Racism is far more deeply rooted and often glossed over with justifications — they don't need to be *good* motivations or *healthy* ones, but we need to believe in them. Or, at least, we need to believe that the antagonist believes them. Ask yourself: what does the antagonist tell himself? How does he sleep at night?

9. BLACK HATS, WHITE HATS, CAN'T WE ALL JUST GET ALONG?

All villains are antagonists. But not all antagonists are villains. "Villain" is a perfectly suitable character type in many genre stories: the serial killer, the evil wizard, the warm-blooded werewolf, whatever. But real life doesn't always offer up "bad guys" (though we'd sure like to see it that way). Antagonists can (and often should) fall into that gray zone instead of the black-and-white dichotomy. Want an example? In **First Blood**, John Rambo is the protagonist and Sheriff Teasle is the antagonist — but Teasle's not a "bad guy." Wrong in a lot of ways, but not villainous.

10. NEMESSES AND ARCH-ENEMIES

Earlier I referenced antagonists that oppose the protagonist directly — as in, the antagonist really enjoys messing with the protagonist ("I poured soda on your bed, kicked over your houseplants, and threw all your books on the floor! Ha ha ha, Dave! Again I am triumphant!"). An antagonist of this nature is, of course, a nemesis or arch-enemy of the protagonist.

11. FIND YOUR FAVORITE ANTAGONISTS IN POP CULTURE

You want to know what goes into a good antagonist, look no further than the stories and pop culture properties you love dearly. Why is Hannibal Lecter a great antagonist? *Is* he? What about Darth Vader, Voldemort, Khan, Gollum, Norman Bates, Hans Gruber, Annie Wilkes, Prince Zuko, Marlo Stanfield, the Cobra Kai Sensei John Kreese, the monkey from Monkey Shines, or Rob Schneider?

12. NOW LOOK TO YOUR OWN LIFE

Turn now from pop culture and instead look to your own life. Identify your own personal antagonists. Then realize that these are infinitely more complex and sympathetic than you find in a lot of fiction. Our parents are often our antagonists through our teenage years; but they don't start that way and they often don't end that way. And *oh* what a powerful and valuable lesson that is. Now, take it one step further: try to see if you've ever been somebody's antagonist. Surely you have? Your ex-friends probably saw you as one. A teacher, maybe. A forgotten friend. A bullied kid. A sibling. Bring what you discover there into your storytelling. Find the complexity within the antagonist; we don't need *sympathy* for the antagonists necessarily, but we demand empathy. If we cannot understand them, then we will not believe in them. More on that soon.

13. WRITE FROM WITHIN THE ENEMY CAMP

Write from the antagonist's point-of-view. Maybe this is something that goes into the story itself, or maybe it's just an exercise betwixt you and your ownself. But you gotta get all up in them guts, son. You have to wear the antagonist's skin and use his mind like a helmet. Unpleasant, perhaps, but necessary.

14. HOLDING HANDS WITH MONSTERS

We need to sit with the antagonist, too — as the audience, we may not need to, erm, “get all up in them guts,” but we *do* need time spent with the antagonist for them to bloom as a fully-formed figure in our mind. Give us time with the antagonist away from the main character so that we can see who they are, what they want, why they do what they do. Force us to babysit the monster.

15. OVER-POWERED IS UNDER-INTERESTING

God-like uber-antagonists who never lose and who know everything there is to know and who are forever one step ahead of the game are just as dull as a protagonist who features the same over-powered qualities. (Worse, an antagonist of this particular caliber must often be trumped on a technicality.) It's called “a game of cat-and-mouse,” not “a game where the mouse goes up against an orbital laser built by the Stephen Hawking.” Though, now that I say that out loud, I'm pretty sure my next book will prominently feature a Hawking-built orbital laser. Dibs! DIBS. I called dibs. Get away from that idea or I'll stab you with a barbecue fork.

16. (BUT WE WON'T BUY “UNDER-POWERED,” EITHER)

The antagonist has to be a real challenge, just the same. Weak-kneed noodle-spined dumb-as-dirt antagonists need not apply. Give the protagonist *something to do*. A believable foe goes a long way, especially one that has *some* advantage over our main character — we want to worry that the antagonist can't be beaten. Not because he's a hyper-powered god-like genius, but because he's just *that much* smarter, stronger, and more capable than our hero. Lack of antagonistic power means a lack of tension. So, uhh, don't do that.

17. STILL ABIDE BY THE RULES AND LAWS OF THE STORYWORLD

The protagonist must work within the storyworld — the antagonist must, too. All the characters are chained to the world you create. The antagonist may *exploit* the storyworld, may *circumvent* the rules in some fashion, but it is not in ignorance of those rules as much as a character-driven contravention of them.

18. CHATTY CATHY CLIP YOUR STRINGS

“Ahh, Mister James Q. Clark Kent Bondwalker, Jr. — now that I have you dangling over a pit of a starveling toddlers covered in the bloody marrow-jam of the bones of their gummed-to-death opponents, let me bore you with the the entire breadth and depth of my plan! I will share for you my motivations, my weaknesses, and give for you a glimpse of my end-game. Do I expect you to talk, Mister Bondwalker? No. I expect you to die. And, failing that, I expect you to use my confession against me at a later date because that's what the Villain Manual suggests is most likely to happen.” Get done with chatty *tell-don't-show* antagonists. No more villains who over-share expository details. Ugh.

19. FREAK ME OUT BY FORCING ME TO EMOTIONALLY CONNECT

Once, *just once*, put me on the same page as the antagonist. He can be vile — a kitten-kicker, a baby-puncher, a drives-too-slow-in-the-fast-lane kind of dude. But then, make me connect with him: something he does, something he believes, should be something I would do, something I believe. Or connect me to his past — help me understand *why* he karate-chops puppies. Empathy is powerful stuff. Connect me to the protagonist and I identify with his struggle. Connect me with the antagonist and I identify — even if in a fleeting way — with his villainy.

20. ANTAGAPALOOZA

Worth noting: just as you can have multiple main characters, you can have multiple antagonists. An ensemble of opponents works — it just requires balance to make sure they all get enough story-time.

21. ARCTAGONIST

The antagonist can have an arc. *Should* have an arc, actually. An antagonist doesn't start at Point A and end at Point A. He changes and grows (or sometimes shrinks), same as the protagonist. Don't assume the antagonist needs to be a static, unswerving face of conflict — have his character shift with changing conditions, have his madness deepen, his hatred or pain worsen, his zealotry catch like a grease-fire.

21. IDEAS AND INSTITUTIONS AND OTHER NON-CHARACTERY ANTAGONISTS

An antagonist needn't actually be a character — an antagonist can be an idea (“racism”), an institution (“the CIA”), a natural force (“Another Paul Blart movie”). Zombies probably count as this sort of antagonist — they're relatively faceless and on par with a hurricane or disease. Just the same, antagonism always deserves the face of *some* character — a character championing an idea (dragon-wizard poo-bah of the KKK!), working for the institution (callous field agent!), or complicating the natural force (especially persistent zombie!).

23. THE “KICK THE CAT” MOMENT

In Blake Snyder's books, he speaks of giving the hero a “Save the Cat” moment — meaning, we get to rally behind the protagonist early on as we get to see just what he's capable of because, y'know, he rescues the cat from the tree (metaphorically). Antagonists need the reverse: one requires a “Kick the Cat” moment (see also: “Detonate the Puppy,” “Machine Gun the Dolphin,” or “Force the Baby Seal to Watch a Marathon of the Real Houswives” moment). We need to see just why the antagonist *is* the antagonist — show us an act that reveals for us the depths of his trouble-making, his hatred, his perversion of the ethical laws and social mores of man.

24. LET THE ANTAGONIST WIN

Let the antagonist win. Maybe not at the end, but periodically, throughout. Let him break Batman's back, or kill a hostage, or take all the toilet paper off the roll and *crash of thunder* fail to replace it.

25. LOVE TO HATE, HATE TO LOVE

If you ignore everything else I wrote here (and for all I know, you will) then at least absorb this with your storytelling brain: the biggest and best test of an antagonist is that I want to a) love to hate them and/or b) hate to love them. Do either or both and it's a major win. If you make me love them and I feel uncomfortable about that? *You win*. If you make me despise them and I *love* despising them the way a dog loves to roll around in roadkill? *You win again*. I hate that I love Hans Gruber. I love that I hate every Nazi in every Indiana Jones movie. For goodness sake, *make me feel something*.